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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN LANTOS' MEETING WITH FM LAVROV

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Congressman Tom Lantos, meeting with FM Lavrov February 19, underlined the importance of building strong ties between Russia and the U.S. by reinvigorating links between legislators and working together on issues like nuclear nonproliferation. Lavrov welcomed closer legislative ties and responded enthusiastically to Lantos' pledge to work to lift Jackson-Vanik legislation. Both agreed that proposals to establish civilian nuclear fuel centers held out significant promise as a way to handle global proliferation concerns. Lavrov urged that Russia, the U.S. and other EU 3 Plus 3 members move forward carefully to address Iran's nuclear file in the face of Tehran's "arrogance." On Kosovo, Lavrov was adamant that Russia could not support an outcome that was not also acceptable to Belgrade. Lavrov pledged that Russia would act on information that Syria was not complying with weapons end-use requirements and, while urging engagement with Syria, revealed that Putin had passed a blunt message to Asad during a December visit that Syria had to act now to restore its credibility with its regional neighbors. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Congressman Lantos, accompanied by the Ambassador, had an hour-long meeting with FM Lavrov on February 19 to discuss U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, nonproliferation initiatives, Iran, Kosovo, and the Middle East. Igor Neverov, MFA Director for North American Affairs, and Legislative Assistant Michael Beard also participated.

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STRENGTHENING LEGISLATIVE TIES  
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¶3. (SBU) Congressman Lantos underlined his interest in reinvigorating ties between U.S. and Russian legislators as part of an effort to build a strong relationship between the two countries. Lantos said he would ask his counterpart, Duma Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Konstantin Kosachev, to formalize existing exchanges between legislatures. FM Lavrov welcomed Lantos' suggestion as timely given the 200th anniversary of U.S.-Russian relations and stressed that he highly valued his own contacts with U.S. legislators. He warned that progress in the bilateral relationship could be lost as both Russia and the U.S. approached election cycles and suggested that contacts among legislators could help allay questions, including about Russia's record on safeguarding nuclear materials.

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BILATERAL RELATIONS, DEMOCRACY AND JACKSON-VANIK  
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¶4. (SBU) FM Lavrov raised concerns about legislation sponsored by Congressman Lantos to advance democracy in Russia and other countries by requiring U.S. diplomats to intensify their work with opposition politicians. He said that good diplomats were in contact with opposition politicians as a matter of course, but by legally insisting that officials do this, it looked intrusive and raised

questions among Russian elites about U.S. attitudes towards Russia. Lavrov said he understood the need for elected officials to be responsive in a democratic society, but said that Moscow viewed attacks on Russia in the Western media during the past year as "an organized campaign." He attributed the scope of the attacks to a lack of objective information about Russia, which was aided and abetted by politicians who benefited politically from slamming Moscow.

15. (SBU) Turning to bilateral discussions about human rights issues, FM Lavrov stressed that there were positive signs. Both Presidents had endorsed an agreement between Russian Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin and the Carnegie Endowment which would establish a bilateral non-governmental dialogue, with the first meeting of the group now slated for April. Lavrov also raised Jackson-Vanik legislation, arguing that the original purpose of the law had long been met and that it had become an anomaly. To Lavrov's visible surprise, Congressman Lantos promised that he would seek to move on legislation lifting Jackson-Vanik upon his return to Washington. Lavrov enthusiastically welcomed this pledge.

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NONPROLIFERATION INITIATIVES  
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16. (SBU) Congressman Lantos noted that he had recently introduced legislation that would establish international nuclear fuel banks under IAEA auspices and invited Russian participation in the program. Lavrov surveyed proposals to establish centers that would provide safeguarded access to nuclear fuel for civilian programs, while noting that the NPT did not prohibit states from pursuing full nuclear fuel cycles. Lavrov warned against attempts for now to reopen the

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NPT because NAM members would seek unhelpful amendments. He suggested that the U.S. and Russia work together to persuade states to participate in nuclear fuel centers, while acknowledging such efforts might also require economic incentives. At some point, states could take another look at the NPT. Russia had already begun a pilot project at the Angarsk facility to implement Putin's International Nuclear Fuel Cycle Center proposal, and Kazakhstan had expressed an interest in participation.

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IRAN  
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17. (SBU) Turning to Iran, Lavrov highlighted Tehran's continuing insistence on its rights under NPT to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle. Lavrov said Moscow did not favor proposals that would sacrifice some EU 3 Plus 3 criteria in order to prevent Iran from moving ahead to full-scale industrial uranium enrichment. In any event, such proposals were unlikely to be successful. Reviewing recent discussions of Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov in Iran and former Iranian FM Ali Akbar Velayati in Moscow, Lavrov characterized Iran as "arrogant" and inflexible, and argued that the EU 3 Plus 3 negotiators would need to carefully evaluate what steps to take to meet shared goals. In this regard, Lavrov heralded the negotiations over UNSCR 1737 as a model -- they took some time, but the resolution was producing results by making Iran rethink its position.

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KOSOVO  
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18. (SBU) Congressman Lantos probed for flexibility on the Russian side on Kosovo. Lavrov contrasted U.S. and Russian views on Iran, Iraq, the Middle East, and frozen conflicts -- where the sides shared the same basic objectives but differed at times over tactics -- with the question of Kosovo's status. On Kosovo, there was a disagreement over objectives. Russia's view was that deciding Kosovo's status without the consent of Belgrade was "absolutely unacceptable" and

threatened to destabilize the Balkans. While Moscow understood that the status question could not drag on for years, it viewed U.S. efforts to "speed up" a solution as counterproductive. In Lavrov's view, the threat of violence by Kosovars was not an adequate justification for a quick decision.

¶9. (SBU) FM Lavrov argued that the West had made concessions to Kosovar concerns ever since UNSCR 1244 was adopted, but had given Serbian interests short shrift by failing to enforce resolution provisions that benefited the Serbs. Pronouncing himself "not optimistic" on the outcome of the Ahtisaari plan, Lavrov foresaw that a draft UNSCR might avoid endorsing independence while using careful wording and constructive ambiguity to achieve that result. For Russia's part, Kosovo still held an emotional resonance, as reflected in former PM Primakov's recent article advocating a veto of a Kosovo UNSCR. Russia was ready to cooperate on a platform of mutually acceptable negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina.

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ENERGY SECURITY  
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¶10. (SBU) Lavrov expressed an interest in U.S. proposals to develop energy saving technology and alternative fuels and to establish safe nuclear plants. He defended Russian energy policy, arguing that Moscow had never violated any of its energy contracts with its neighbors. Russia had the right to trade at market prices, even with its closest allies.

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SYRIA  
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¶11. (SBU) The Congressman pressed Lavrov on the supply of Russian weapons to Hizbollah through Syria. Lavrov reviewed Israeli allegations this past summer that Russian anti-tank missiles that had been sold to Syria had ended up in Hizbollah's hands. The Israelis had provided sufficient documentation to prompt the Russians to ask the Syrians for an explanation. The Syrians claimed they had left the weapons behind when they withdrew from Lebanon, but the Russians had successfully obtained more specific end-use promises that now clarified that Russia could conduct surprise inspections. Lavrov said Moscow was aware of allegations that weapons were still being transferred over the Lebanese-Syrian border and promised Russia would act to verify end-uses if specific information was provided.

¶12. (SBU) Turning to the situation in the Middle East,

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Lavrov said that Putin and he had heard during Putin's Gulf trip last week that it was important to involve the Syrians rather than isolate them. There was widespread concern in the Gulf and Jordan that they were "losing" Syria to Iran. At the same time, Asad could best serve his own interests by "doing the right thing" and "getting out of the mess he is in." During Asad's visit to Moscow in December, Lavrov said, Putin had been blunt in suggesting specific steps Asad should take: working with Hamas and Hizbollah on freeing the captured Israelis and acting in a positive way to influence the situation in Lebanon. Moscow had also conveyed to Damascus Washington's concerns about policing the Syrian-Iraqi border and the Damascus airport. Lavrov was also hopeful (if surprised) about efforts by Saudi Arabia and Iran to encourage progress in Lebanon. He suggested that Iranian helpfulness in this case provided support for the view that Tehran might be willing to discuss regional issues in a productive fashion.

¶13. (SBU) Congressman Lantos has cleared this message.  
BURNS